


Getting into Graduate School: Tips and Timelines

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Overview

- ▶ *Is graduate school the right choice?*
 - ▶ *Decisions to make before applying*
 - ▶ *Assessing your qualifications*
 - ▶ *Choosing programs*
 - ▶ *Applying*
 - ▶ *What to do after you've applied*
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Is Grad School a Good Choice for me?

- ▶ *Do I NEED a graduate degree?*
- ▶ *Realities of graduate life*



Why Graduate School?

Good reasons

- ▶ “I will **NEED** a graduate degree in order to achieve my career goals”
- ▶ “Graduate school will give me the education and background to do the specific job I want to do.”
- ▶ “I love the pursuit of knowledge, scholarship and research for their own sake”

Not-so-good Reasons

- ▶ “I want to make a lot of money”
- ▶ “I don’t know what I want to do yet and graduate school will give me more time to decide”
- ▶ “I have **ALWAYS** known I was going to get a Doctorate in something.”
- ▶ “Grad school is just the logical next step.”



Realities of Graduate Life

▶ Classes

- ▶ 9-12 credit hours per semester
 - ▶ 3 credit hours of research in some programs
- ▶ 50-60+ h work week
 - ▶ Often includes 10-20 h assistantship
- ▶ Qualitatively different from undergrad
 - ▶ Goals – synthesis, training future colleagues
 - ▶ Size – 5-15 students is common
 - ▶ Type – seminar, student lead
 - ▶ Assignments – substantially more reading (50-80+ pages per class per week), fewer textbooks & more primary sources
 - ▶ Assessment – presentations & papers



Realities of Graduate Life

- ▶ **Commitment**
 - ▶ Master's/ Specialists: 2-3 years
 - ▶ PhD/ PsyD/ EDD: 4-7 years
- ▶ 50% of individuals who begin a Ph.D. program never finish
- ▶ Determination and self-discipline are required, over and above intellectual ability
- ▶ Besides coursework, major hurdles include:
 - ▶ Masters thesis, comprehensive exams, dissertation, other research commitments, teaching or research assistantships
- ▶ Considerable demands placed on your personal identity and self-reliance



Things to Consider *Before* Applying to Graduate Programs

- ▶ Your interests, values & strengths
- ▶ Where do psychologists work?
- ▶ *What do they DO?*
- ▶ Degrees, accreditation & licensure
- ▶ 3 models of training and practice



Clarifying Your Interests, Values & Strengths

- ▶ **Your work orientation**
 - ▶ (people, data, things?)
- ▶ **Work setting**
 - ▶ (outdoors, government, private practice, academia, organizational consulting, travel?)
- ▶ **Work activities**
 - ▶ (testing, documenting, analyzing, being innovative, creative, teaching, supervising, etc.)



Where Do Psychologists Work and What Do They Do?

- ▶ **Do some occupational research**
 - ▶ O*Net, Occupational Outlook Handbook
 - ▶ FOCUS, Career Center online, etc.
 - ▶ **Talk to people**
 - ▶ Faculty
 - ▶ Graduate students
 - ▶ Professionals in the field (informational interviews, networking)
 - ▶ **Get involved!**
 - ▶ Psi Chi, Psyc Club, other campus orgs.
 - ▶ Research, Research... and did I mention research? (become a research assistant!)
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On Degrees, Accreditation & Licensure

- ▶ **Degrees**
 - ▶ Field Specific
 - ▶ Understand the differences between
 - ▶ MA, MS, M.Ed, Ed.S, PhD, Psy.D and Ed.D
- ▶ **APA Accreditation**
 - ▶ Required for Licensure in 3 fields
 - ▶ Clinical, Counseling, & School Psychology
- ▶ **Licensure**
 - ▶ Required for practice in clinical, counseling, or school psychology... respected, but not required in I/O.
 - ▶ Usually involves post-graduate board exam and a minimum number of supervised hours of work
- ▶ **Varies by state**

3 models of Training & Practice

Scientist-Oriented

(many Ph.D programs fall here)

Scientist-Practitioner (Balanced)

(Some Ph.D. programs fall here while most Psy.D. programs will fall here.)

Practitioner-Oriented

(Most Master's level programs will probably fall here)

- **Terminal Masters programs** are usually practitioner-oriented

- **Be aware:** Almost all **Ph.D programs** claim to follow the scientist-practitioner model of training.

- Look for evidence of applied, practical training experiences (e.g. internships, practicum, supervised counseling) if this is what you really want from your program.

- **PsyD programs** usually more balanced or practitioner-oriented
 - although you can *not* avoid research altogether in an APA-accredited program!

- *See this website for a great discussion of the differences in the models and the reputations of these programs*

- http://www.psichi.org/pubs/articles/article_171.asp

Assessing Your Qualifications for Graduate School

I. Objective Criteria

- ▶ Grades, GRE Scores, Coursework

II. Non-Objective Criteria

- ▶ Letters of recommendation, Personal statement

III. Unspecified Criteria

- ▶ Resume, quality of application materials, writing skills
- ▶ Apparent maturity level, apparent self-directedness and discipline

IV. Match to department/ program



Grades

- ▶ **Varies by school & program**
 - ▶ *Master's ~ 3.0
 - ▶ *PhD ~ 3.4 (3.2-3.6+)
 - ▶ *These are not guarantees, rather guidelines, about what is typically recommended
- ▶ **Different types examined:**
 - ▶ Cumulative
 - ▶ Psychology
 - ▶ Last 2 years



Graduate Record Examination (GRE)

- ▶ **GRE - GENERAL TEST**
 - ▶ Verbal
 - ▶ Quantitative
 - ▶ Analytical (sometimes weighted less heavily)
- ▶ **GRE - Psychology Subject Test**
 - ▶ not required by all schools

See www.gre.org to get all the information you need and to take a practice test and/or request practice exams on CD
Kaplan offers free practice tests via our career center. Take advantage!

** International Applicants may also be required to submit scores on the TOEFL

GRE *Hints*

- ▶ **Prepare & Practice!**
 - ▶ Single most important thing you can do!
 - ▶ More than any factor, the GRE may make or break your chances for entry into your desired program
 - ▶ PREP Materials (Princeton review, Kaplan)
 - ▶ **Take it early**
 - ▶ So you can take it again if you need to
 - ▶ You'll have plenty of time to send scores by deadlines
 - ▶ **Re-testing**
 - ▶ Testing twice to improve your score is not uncommon
 - ▶ Testing more than twice should be done with caution (repeated mediocre or bad scores only reinforce your original scores)
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More Hints for GRE

- ▶ **Acceptance range**
 - ▶ Average recommendations for combined verbal and quantitative:
 - ▶ 900-1100 master's,
 - ▶ 1150+ for PhD
 - ▶ **Cut-off Scores**
 - ▶ May be based on combined scores or by section
 - ▶ May be weighted more heavily or less heavily than GPA in total applicant score
 - ▶ **Studying**
 - ▶ Verbal typically cannot be improved “over night”
 - ▶ Quantitative can be improved with only a little study
 - ▶ Regardless, be familiar with all sections and the instructions for each so that you don't waste time on these!
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Coursework

Required courses may include:

- ▶ **Statistics**
- ▶ **Experimental Methods**
- ▶ **Natural Science Psychology**
 - ▶ **Psychobiology, Sensation & Perception**
- ▶ **Social Science Psychology**
 - ▶ **Social Psychology, Psyc of the Workplace**



II. **Non-Objective (Subjective) Criteria**

- ▶ *Letters of Recommendation*
- ▶ *Personal Statement / Application Essays*
- ▶ *Experience*
 - ▶ *Research, work, volunteer, leadership*
- ▶ *Interview Performance*
- ▶ *Extracurricular Activities*



Asking for Letters of Recommendation

- ▶ Whom to ask?
 - ▶ Recommendations from Professors are expected for grad school applications
 - ▶ Sometimes other sources will suffice and can even add support (e.g. work supervisors)
 - ▶ General decreasing levels of preference
 - ▶ Letter from a Professor of Psychology (most preferred)
 - ▶ Letter from a Professor of Psychology who integrates information from a grad student about your work
 - ▶ Letter from a Professor from another discipline (e.g. your minor or a related field)
 - ▶ Supervisor from a work situation
 - ▶ Grad Student/Grad Lab Instructor (much less preferred, but they may contribute a faculty letter)
 - ▶ Member of the Clergy, family friend, etc (never!)
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Asking for Letters of Recommendation

- ▶ **Ask professors who know you WELL**
 - ▶ *Get to know your professors!*
 - ▶ *Perform outstanding work*
 - ▶ *Sit in the front of the class*
 - ▶ *Participate*
 - ▶ *Make your work memorable*
 - ▶ *Talk with your professor outside of class*
 - ▶ *Make sure your professor knows your career goals*
 - ▶ *Do independent research (e.g. Psyc 4711472, or volunteer)*



Asking for Letters of Recommendation

▶ ASK:

- ▶ Many students fail to ask a professor the one important question that can make a big difference in their letters:
 - ▶ “Can you write me a good/strong letter of support for grad school?”
- ▶ You want the BEST letter possible. Don’t guess whether a professor can write you one. Simply ask them! They will tell you the truth.



Asking for Letters of Recommendation

- ***ASK Early!!***
 - *Plan ahead...*
 - *October is a busy month.*
 - *November is worse.*
 - *December is gone. 😊*
 - *Getting on your professor's radar screen early so that your letters get more time and attention*



Asking for Letters of Recommendation

- **Make their job easy!**
 - *Provide each recommender with a list of things to help them write you the BEST letter they can:*
 - How they know you? (what classes you've taken with them and what grade you made or what project you did)
 - Specific behavioral examples of your readiness for grad school
 - A copy of your resume/vita, personal statement, coursework & grades (e.g. transcript) and GRE scores
 - Let them know if you would like them to address weaknesses or “holes” in any of these areas.
 - List of schools/programs and their application due dates.
 - Pre-Address and stamp their envelopes!



The Personal Statement

(a.k.a., Letter of Intent, Statement of Purpose)

- ▶ **Purpose**
 - ▶ Highlight your uniqueness' and strengths
- ▶ Most schools ask for a general statement addressing the following:
 - ▶ What are your career goals?
 - ▶ What experiences have led you to develop these goals? (e.g. What have you been “doing” to prepare yourself for this field)
 - ▶ How can our program help you fulfill these goals? (e.g. What are your general research interests and why would their program be a good match for you?)

Organizing the Personal Statement

- I. Statement of interest in the specific psychology field you are applying for and your general career goals
- II. Statement of your past experiences (academic, research, work, volunteer, etc.) and how/why it lead to or supports your career goals as well as why it makes you a good candidate for grad school
- III. End with a paragraph devoted to why this school or program suits you well. (faculty research interests match yours, emphasis on science or practitioner training suits you, geographic location is good, etc.)



Personal Statement

Do's & Don'ts

DO:

- ▶ Be *honest and realistic*
- ▶ Allow yourself time to write and revise
- ▶ Be willing to write many drafts!'
- ▶ Emphasize what makes you appropriately different/gives you a special perspective



Personal Statement

Do's & Don'ts

DO:

- ▶ Demonstrate familiarity with the program
- ▶ Emphasize “match”
- ▶ Read your essay aloud
- ▶ Have someone else critically proofread and edit your work for grammar, content and tone



Personal Statement

Do's & Don'ts

DON'T:

- ▶ Repeat data that are already in your application such as GRE scores or GPA
- ▶ Feel that you must dress up your essay with jargon or “fluff.”
- ▶ Use superlative language “all, never, always” unless it's clearly true.



III. Unspecified Criteria

- ▶ *Resume/ CV*
- ▶ *Quality of Application Materials*
- ▶ *School and work-site attitude & behavior*
- ▶ *Special Projects and honors courses*
- ▶ *Diversity*



Resume / Curriculum Vita

Things to Highlight

- ▶ Education
- ▶ Research Experience
- ▶ Papers presented at Professional Conferences
- ▶ Papers Published
- ▶ Honors
- ▶ Career Objectives
- ▶ Teaching Experience
- ▶ Clinical Experience
- ▶ Psychology-related field Experience
- ▶ Professional Affiliations, offices held
- ▶ Job Experience



Choosing Programs to Apply to

1. Know yourself

2. Research the Programs

- ▶ See your professional organization websites for lists of accredited programs
- ▶ Contact programs for materials (find contact on website)
- ▶ Do you meet the program criteria?

3. Compile a final list of 1-12 schools

- ▶ Sure bets (at least a few)
- ▶ Good Matches (majority of your apps)
- ▶ Long Shots (1 or 2 dream schools)

4. Visit the programs on your final list!

Application General Timeline

- ▶ **Prior to junior year**
 - ▶ Research career fields, get work and volunteer experience to confirm your goals, develop relationships with professors, earn good grades
- ▶ **Junior Year (Fall & Spring)**
 - ▶ Get research experience, begin looking at programs (in-state and regionally)
 - ▶ Summer - take GRE, evaluate results, choose programs
 - ▶ Draft personal statement and resume/vita
- ▶ **Senior Year Fall**
 - ▶ Re-write and revise personal statement
 - ▶ Request Transcripts, GRE scores be sent to all schools
 - ▶ Request letters of recommendation be sent to all schools
 - ▶ Start working on financial aid forms
 - ▶ Complete application forms for each school and department
- ▶ **Senior Year Spring**
 - ▶ Prepare and mail in application packets well before deadlines
 - ▶ Follow up with programs who do not have finished applications
 - ▶ Wait, you should here by April 15th



Requesting Transcripts and GRE Test Scores

- ▶ **Request them Early**
 - ▶ For WU Transcripts:
<http://www.winthrop.edu/recandreg/pdf/trans.pdf>
 - ▶ For GRE: <http://www.gre.org>
- ▶ **Costs**
 - ▶ Currently free unless you need it overnighted or same-day expressed



Preparing your Application

- ▶ **The Self-managed Application?**
 - ▶ Pulling everything together into one envelope (requested by some schools)
- ▶ **Stay organized!**
 - ▶ Use Checklists
 - ▶ Keep accurate records (photocopies) of everything sent!
 - ▶ Confirmation postcards in all letters and packets



After you've Applied

- ▶ Follow up
 - ▶ *Calling? What is considered **pestering**?*
 - ▶ *Post card confirmations alleviate this problem*
- ▶ Upon Acceptance
 - ▶ *Re-VISIT schools*
 - ▶ *Consult with a faculty member before making your final decision*



Fall Backs...

What to do if you don't get in:

- ▶ *Do not panic!*
- ▶ *Work for a year, reconsider applying next year?*
- ▶ *Prepare for the GRE, retake it and try again*
- ▶ *Consider Master's Programs if you haven't yet*
 - ▶ *M.A. In General Psychology can strengthen your skills and qualifications*
- ▶ *Apply to similar degree programs*
 - ▶ *(I.e. HR, Social Work, M&F Therapy, Education, Child Development, Biology)*

Quotes from Experienced Applicants



- ▶ "Whoa. I never knew that applying to Grad school would be like having a full time job!"
 - ▶ "I'm SO glad I applied to program X as a fall-back... it ended up being my best choice in the end and I love it!"
 - ▶ "Visiting my final programs made all the difference in deciding which one to attend!"
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